

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH ADMIRAL JAMES STEVENSON, UNITED STATES NAVY, COMMANDER, U.S. NAVAL FORCES SOUTHERN COMMAND VIA TELECONFERENCE
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ADM. STEVENSON: Hey, Jack, Jim Stevenson.

CHARLES "JACK" HOLT (chief, New Media Operations, OASD PA) OR LIEUTENANT COMMANDER BROOK DEWALT, USN (Office of the Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs): Hey, Admiral. Welcome to the Bloggers Roundtable. Thanks for joining us, sir.

ADM. STEVENSON: Thank you very much for the invite.

MR. HOLT: And, well, if you've got an opening statement for us, sir, we can go ahead and get started, and then we'll move right into the question and answer stuff.

ADM. STEVENSON: Okay. Well, I don't know if I have too much of an opening statement. I just think that last week was the reestablishment of Fourth Fleet. I think basically the Navy and probably the Department of Defense recognized the importance of the region to the south of the United States -- that includes the Caribbean and western side of the Atlantic and the eastern side of the Pacific and all our partners down there. And I think that now the recreation of a geographic fleet gives a little bit more stature for the Navy within the region. And I think that the other navies and coast guards recognize that and they would view that as a positive step.

And happy to answer any questions.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir. Thank you very much.

And once again, I'd like to remind you that with us today is Rear Admiral James Stevenson, who's the United States Navy Commander of U.S. Naval Forces Southern Command. And -- (name inaudible) -- you were first on the call with us this afternoon, so why don't you get us started?

Q Thank you, Admiral, for joining us, for giving us this opportunity to talk about this topic. I have a question regarding the UNITAS exercise. I understand you guys are doing the 49th edition of the exercise right now off of Brazil. And when the South American media got a hold of the George Washington coming, the Brazilian media was very excited, kind of highlighting the emphasis that the United States puts on the exercise, but a lot

of the other nations highlighted that it was considered outdated and it lacked relevance for them.

And you know, if you look at the number of participants, Chile, Colombia, Peru, Ecuador, Venezuela and Uruguay have all kind of dropped out of the exercise over the years. And we're left with three participants. Even Spain isn't participating this year.

So I'm just curious, there's a perception in the South American media of the relevance of the United States Navy present in the maritime environment down there. And I'm wondering how the Fourth Fleet changes this perception? What does it do to contribute a relevant presence to the region?

ADM. STEVENSON: Well, I think, I would disagree with your premise.

As you've mentioned, we are in our 49th UNITAS series. Several years ago, I decided to divide the exercise into basically two exercises, both entitled UNITAS, one on the Atlantic side of South America and the other one on the Pacific side of South America.

All countries that have been participants in the past -- I'm only aware of two that have decided not to participate and primarily for political reasons, because their navies certainly would like to participate -- those two countries being Venezuela, for political reasons, and Uruguay, which has also for political reasons decided not to do that.

Within the last three years, the UNITAS exercises has been made relevant in that we do 21st century missions and events and scenarios. And I think if you ask the navies, of each one of those countries that participate, they would definitely support me in that these are vigorous events now; that they certainly are relevant in what we do, with the economic trade through the region and how we set up for the defense and security of the region. And so I think that the series themselves are very good.

Now, I think also that the Fourth Fleet can enhance these exercises by now having perhaps a more definitive administrative alignment to Big Navy, to the Navy staff and its chain of command, and that hopefully that with an increase in stature by a high-ranking admiral in charge, you know, as you broker the forces between the various theaters, then perhaps you can get more towards the Southern Hemisphere.

But it's still going to be kind of an uphill battle in that it's still not a three-star billet, as the other fleet commanders are. And that's something that will probably be addressed in the future, but right now, you know, you take what you can get. You hope to leverage that. And I think more and perhaps better-apportioned forces will be provided.

I do want to make mention that UNITAS will be approaching its 50th year next year, and what we're trying to do -- we're calling it UNITAS Gold for the 50th anniversary, and we're trying to have all the partner nations come up to the United States' waters this time, outside the Jacksonville operation area, and conduct the exercise. And we'll see how that goes.

MR. HOLT: Okay, sir, be looking forward to that.

Greg? Greg Grant, you were next.

Q Yes. I'd like to ask a force structure question, if I could. What are you looking at fleet-wise, ship-wise down in the area? And what kind of capability would you most like to see in the -- over the next few years?

ADM. STEVENSON: You know, I think, as you read the announcement, there's no forces that are going to be linked onto the 4th Fleet; that the 4th Fleet will be patterned pretty much after 5th Fleet and NAVCENT, the Navy component for Central Command, and that the forces that come into the Area of Operations within the Caribbean, within Central and South American waters, will be under the operational and tactical control of the 4th Fleet. And these are anything that Navy -- it's aircraft, submarine, surface ships and personnel. It's kind of what we do now, only in a more officially and formally recognized format. The Navy component for Southern Command has always kind of been a difference, and everything now is well aligned. It's now 4th Fleet and -- or will be 4th Fleet and NAVSOUTH, and the forces that flow in will be under our control.

The best capabilities that I have in theater have always been the amphibious forces. The amphibious forces are typically low-draft ships that can get into the ports that we have in the Caribbean and Central and South America a lot easier than larger draft ships.

They typically have enormous capacity to bring materials and things, for mil-to-mil training and the Marines, if the Marines want to also train with their counterparts. Typically the amphibious ships have some sort of aviation capability, which makes it very, very good for humanitarian assistance and disaster relief operations.

So I'm a big fan of amphibious ships, although we use a lot of our combatants for the counter-drug efforts. We use our submarines both for national and counter-drug tasking. And the aviation assets that we have, not only on our ships but our fixed-wing, for maritime surveillance and stuff, we certainly utilize that.

But the best capability that I can see is the amphibious ships.

Q Could you elaborate a bit on using submarines for counter-drug? I've never heard that one. I'd just be curious on how you're deploying them.

ADM. STEVENSON: We deploy them just like a surface vessel. And they have the capabilities onboard for surveillance and monitoring. And we use that information to try to work with supporting the Joint Interagency Task Force South, down in Key West, who coordinates all the counter-drugs type of thing. And that's about all I can say on an unclassified line.

Q Sure.

And what about the -- (inaudible) -- LCS in service down there. Could you say anything about that capability?

ADM. STEVENSON: Well, that's a good question. (Laughter.) You know, that's a hot-button issue.

Q Yeah, sure.

ADM. STEVENSON: The whole shipbuilding program's a hot-button issue.

LCS was originally designed to be low-draft and have modules put on, depending upon what capability is needed in that particular area of operation. Example would be anti-submarine module, minesweeping module, I don't know, surface type of module, perhaps an aviation type of module. You name it, they were going to have modules that fit this ship. It was supposedly, you know, a low cost compared to other surface combatants. And the program has mushroomed astronomically as far as cost. So the secretary of the Navy basically curtailed the purchasing of how many of these things were originally supposed to be contracted for.

They were going to be used here. They're essentially designed to replace the Oliver Hazard Perry class frigate. And they would certainly bring capability into this area of operations as well as the others. But we don't see them -- any being, you know, assigned to the fleet yet.

Q Yeah.

ADM. STEVENSON: And so, you know, how long that's going to take, I couldn't tell you. All I know is that, you know, that's a program that's being examined at the highest Navy levels. And I really am not involved in that.

Q Sure.

ADM. STEVENSON: I use the assets as it comes down. And I don't foresee those assets coming to me any time soon.

Q Gotcha. Thank you.

MR. HOLT: Okay. (Name inaudible) -- anything -- any follow-ups?

Q Is it just the two of us?

MR. HOLT: Yeah, I do have a couple of -- I've got a question here that was e-mailed to me from Steeljaw Scribe who was unfortunately called away at the last minute, wasn't able to make it. But I thought I'd give you one more chance here and then I'd follow up with his question.

Q When you talk about amphibious ships being a part of the mix that you're looking for down in the Fourth Fleet -- and that was our initial impression as well, just observing it -- and the question I would ask is are you looking for marine presence or are you looking for alternative payloads? It raises the question with the Boxer deployment with the "gray hull" verse the "white hull" commitments down there. And there's a lot of questions, I think, in that area of what type of fleet constitution the Fourth Fleet would be made up of. You covered some of that.

ADM. STEVENSON: Yeah. I would answer you like this: I think that you recognize that the cooperative maritime strategy for the 21st century has included other core competencies now that include humanitarian assistance, disaster relief and theater security cooperation. You know, thank goodness in this area, you know, we're not at war. There's no conflicts on the seas or anything like that. And so we're focused on building relationships and trying to improve the interoperability of our partner navies and coast guards in the region.

And to do that, as you look at the different platforms that we have had in the last couple years, I think that kind of gives you an indication of the

future. I've already talked about the amphibious ships and I would tell you that, yeah, it brings an enormous capacity to put whatever we want on it, both Kearsarge this year and Boxer will be primarily a humanitarian assistance type of load-out in that doctors and dentists and nongovernmental organization people will embark and we're going to try to perform medical assistance, medical training within the Caribbean and also Central and South America.

And they bring aviation capability with it, and they also bring the capability of embarking marines. And if you look at the theater security cooperation aspect of exercises and trying to enhance the training of your counterparts, marines play a role. And so do CBs and so do engineers and so do divers and those type of specialties. And so an amphibious unit can bring all those things.

And likewise the initiative we had with the High Speed Vessel Swift last year, where instead of, you know, bringing supplies or troops within that vessel, we basically rolled in trailers for classrooms. And we conducted training on whatever the host nation wanted. They're priorities in training.

And so these types of initiatives, I think, bode well for the SOUTHCOM area. And I think they'll continue. And so that's, I mean, I'll take as many assets as I can possibly deal with. I mean, there's 32 countries and 13 territories down here. And there's enough to go around.

Q Are you going to -- is Fourth Fleet going to be hosting Global Fleet Stations?

ADM. STEVENSON: Well, we've never stopped. Last year was the High Speed Vessel Swift.

Q Right.

ADM. STEVENSON: This year we have a Global Fleet Station. That's a diving platform. That deploys this summer and will go into a majority of the Caribbean countries and do an awful lot of diving, training, port security, harbor protection type of things. And the following year, even later on in the fall, we may get Swift back, before her contract with the Navy ends, to continue some of the things that we started last year.

And we would hope, as the Joint High Speed Vessel program gets going, that we could do that, or that the Navy decides to renegotiate some contracts, and that we can get those types of vessels, because it's not only just what we do. It's the capabilities that they can bring to any service down here, kind of like an afloat staging base, if you will, with a number of endless possibilities that you could embark up on it.

MR. HOLT: That kind of brings up the question that Steeljaw Scribe sent in to me.

And it is, his question is, quote, "With the decline of the supporting infrastructure in the region and the closure of naval stations Roosevelt Roads and Rodman, et cetera, how sustainable do you see the Fourth Fleet's small unit presence in the AOR, particularly outside the Caribbean?"

ADM. STEVENSON: Well, right now I would think that if you do an analysis of the countries -- I mean, 15 years ago, there wasn't any democracies in Central or South America, period. And this year, if you look, you'll see

just about all democracies with the exception of one and a couple that are very, very far left. But that is the good thing. And the good thing about that is that they welcome the United States into their ports, and so the at-sea sustainment really isn't an issue.

However, if you look at, you know, the capabilities that the United States have -- has if you have have a big-deck amphibious ship, if you have aircraft carriers, if you have high-speed vessels, then essentially you can kind of have your own afloat staging base, where, you know, acting as mother ships and can refuel ships, and we can maintain our presence down here, and we can maintain our cooperation through exercises and training venues and what have you.

So I think it's dependent, and I think that's the huge value that our Navy brings in some of its core competencies, which is its forward presence and the ability to sail anywhere, any time and sustain itself. And we're doing that right now with the deployment of the George Washington Strike Group. Happenstance has the George Washington shifting home ports from Norfolk, Virginia, to Yokosuka, Japan, and we took advantage of it. And right now they're -- have already visited Brazil. They're conducting the UNITAS exercise on the Atlantic side of South America with Brazil and Argentina, and they'll be circumnavigating South America and going up the western coast of South America and hitting a couple of countries there, doing another exercise before they even go to San Diego and on to Yokosuka.

So it's timing. It's preparations. It's, you know, the force allocation around the globe on where we think that we ought to put our assets. And I think the Navy's posture's pretty good right now.

MR. HOLT: Okay. He also had one other question in how you see the 4th Fleet relationships with the Joint Interagency Task Force East.

ADM. STEVENSON: I don't really utilize them too terribly much. You know, 2nd Fleet typically does the east.

I do the south, in Key West, and it's strictly to support counter-drugs. And I don't see the relationship changing at all.

As I mentioned early on, perhaps, you know, in trying to get more assets to utilize in that mission, the Fourth Fleet would be more supportive than if you have to go just with a Navy component route, you know, through the Joint Staff and then that type of process. So again, this administrative chain of direct access in the Navy chain of command probably will help our support with Joint Interagency Task Force South.

MR. HOLT: Okay. Anybody else? Anything else?

Q Yeah, I'd like to ask -- you mentioned these vessels with the humanitarian assistance load. How many -- kind of ports of call would you expect to make with that capability?

ADM. STEVENSON: I think I can give you just a rough number. In specific, this year, Kearsarge will go to about 12 different ports, then I think Boxer goes to eight different ports. Boxer has -- is coming on the -- from San Diego, so she's doing the eastern Pacific, basically. And so some of those time/distance relationships are a little bit longer, where Kearsarge is coming

from Norfolk, going in the Caribbean and focusing on the northern portion of South America and a few ports in Central America.

So that's kind of the distribution, you know, hopefully with two ships, about 20 ports, and, you know, innumerable people. I mean, with Comfort I think we had a similar amount, about 10 ports, but they touched almost 300,000 folks.

Q Wow.

ADM. STEVENSON: So it's quite remarkable, once the word -- once the word's out. And we utilize the embassy to get the word out.

Q Gotcha. You know, you mentioned the amphibious basing, and it sounds like you're kind of describing the sea-basing concept. And could you talk a bit about maybe some lessons you've learned, as far -- that may be applicable to that concept as the Navy goes forward with it.

ADM. STEVENSON: Well, I think what we've seen in this area is that one of the two biggest challenges is -- one is natural disasters, first of all, that -- obviously, the Caribbean is rife for hurricanes. But the region, writ large, is also very susceptible to earthquakes, mudslides, to forest fires, to flooding, to, you know, these natural disasters that just occur during a normal course of a year.

And if you have the ability to provide humanitarian supplies before you leave -- I mean, we plan for that, and they load up supplies just in case.

And then if you position yourself right, if you see a storm and you have indications that it's going to be bad and you position yourself right, as we did with Nicaragua last year, we can respond within 24 hours.

And if a capability is resident with aircraft, then they can certainly perform search and rescue, and surveillance, and kind of give us an oversight, you know, on what it looks like on the ground. And from that, then the individual countries and their requisite agencies that have to respond to that, they have a better wherewithal. And if we can contribute, we will, if asked. And so that's disaster relief.

One of the things that I'm very concerned about is the unknown. And one of the biggest unknowns is, you know, what is the future of Cuba, and will the people really accept Raul Castro as the transition government and be happy with whatever that government brings about? And if they're not, then I'm mindful of the 1980s and the 1990s, where, you know, Cubans took to the seas in droves, thousands of them, in a mass migration attempt to the United States. And you know, if you don't have the capability to rescue these people, then you have a disaster on your hands. So I don't think anybody could sit around and watch, you know, hundreds and hundreds and thousands of people die at sea.

And so the amphibious units, again, if we posture them correctly and we pay attention to indications and possible warnings, and we can certainly intercept those and prevent a disaster such as that magnitude from happening at sea, and it's the perfect platform to doing it. Certainly Coast Guard vessels can help, and so can small combatants, but the capacity, again, is so much larger on an amphibious ship versus a surface combatant, let's say, or a Coast Guard vessel, it's just night and day.

So those are just two examples that I've seen in the past and we've certainly done in the recent future that bodes well for amphibious units operating here in the Southern Hemisphere.

Q Two quick last questions. Do you have much of a piracy problem? I know this has is kind of a hot topic off the Somalia incidents and all. And also, do you have a resident riverine capability down there?

ADM. STEVENSON: With regard to piracy, it's not of the magnitude that it is in, like, say the Horn of Africa or the Straits of Malaga, in Indonesia, that type of area. There is piracy. There's certainly illicit trafficking, whether it be drugs, arms, people, contraband; there certainly is that.

But the piracy that I think you've seen in the papers and other media for, let's say, the Horn of Africa where, you know, vessels are taken down and basically ransomed, we have not seen that here. We're concerned about, perhaps, the proliferation of that type of badness, but right now we're -- it's just not here.

Riverine: No, we do not have any resident riverine capabilities. What we have done is worked very closely with our Navy Expeditionary Command in the reestablishment of our riverine capabilities. And there's a lot of partnering between the countries in South America specifically, because they do have resident riverine forces. They do have training and establishment, some of which we helped build a long time ago, but they do have the training. And so there's kind of a partnering of capabilities where we come and learn from them, and then as we establish how we're -- the direction that we're going in our riverine community, they'll come up and assist or actually learn from us.

And so it's kind of a good news -- good news story.

Q Okay. Thank you.

MR. HOLT: Okay, there. And we're just about out of time, here. Do you have any closing thoughts for us? Closing comments?

ADM. STEVENSON: Well, I guess the only closing comment I would make is I think, really, the Navy by reestablishing Fourth Fleet is serious about the countries in the Caribbean and Central and South America and that we're very mindful of the 40 percent of U.S. trade that goes on with those countries and the 50 percent of the oil imports from that region.

And then it's absolutely imperative that the economic sea lanes of communication remain free and open. And the only forces that really can do that are maritime forces. And so the partnering of all the countries with the United States and having the stature now as a fleet, I think, bodes well and goes in the right direction, sends the right signal, even to the people that, you know, aren't necessarily our greatest supporters. And the signal is certainly in the air, and I think it's up to us to execute it.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir. Thank you very much.

Sir, Admiral James W. Stevenson. He is the commander for the U.S. naval force of South -- Southern Command. Thank you for being with us on the Bloggers Roundtable today, sir.

ADM. STEVENSON: All right. Happy to be able to provide some comments to you all.

MR. HOLT: Thank you very much, sir.

Q Thanks.

Q Thank you.

END.